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Deeper CIA Role in Laos Revealed

By Laurence Stern

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The Central Intelligence Agency spent about \$70 million to operate an army of irregular forces numbering more than 30,000 men in Laos during fiscal 1971, a Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff report disclosed yesterday.

The report portrayed a far broader picture of clandestine American involvement in the Lao guerrilla armies, now known as the BGs (after the French *bataillons guerriers*), than had previously surfaced publicly in Washington.

The 23-page document, prepared by Committee staff members James G. Lowenstein and Richard M. Moose, was released yesterday by Stuart Symington (D-Mo.), chairman of the subcommittee on United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad.

There has been a widespread conception, as a result of Symington subcommittee hearings and newspaper articles two years ago, that the principal CIA-trained guerrilla force in Laos was concentrated in the Plain of Jars under the leadership of Meo Gen. Vang Pao.

But the new report, based on interviews with American military and diplomatic officials in Laos, asserts that BG "irregular" forces are operating in all but one of the five military regions of Laos. Only 38 per cent of the irregulars are under Vang Pao's command in the second military region, which encompasses the Plain of Jars.

The BG irregulars, says the Senate report, are playing a far more important role in the Laotian war than the Royal Lao Army. They have taken heavier casualties and accounted for higher enemy kills than the regular Lao army forces.

In the 1968 to early 1971 period, for example, the BGs reportedly suffered 8,030 killed, and accounted for 22,726 enemy deaths, according to official figures. The Royal Lao Army in the same period lost 3,664 and reported an enemy kill of 8,522.

"The most effective military force in Laos is not the Royal Lao Army, but the force known previously as the *Armee Clandestine* . . . and now as the BGs . . . The BG units are part of the irregular forces which are trained, equipped, supported, advised, and to a great extent, organized by the CIA," the report asserts.

"The BG units have become the cutting edge of the Lao military forces, as one U.S. official puts it."

The irregular units, says the staff report, "do most of the day-to-day patrolling, ambushing and attacking throughout the country." They are "closely" supervised and fed and paid by the CIA. Unlike the Royal Lao Army, the Senate document says, the BGs are guaranteed evacuation by Air America helicopters (a CIA-organized airline) and medical care—in some cases provided in a U.S. field hospital at the Royal Thai Air Force base in Udorn, Thailand.

It took five weeks of negotiation with the Nixon administration to release the sanitized version of the report. The document is shot through with the word "deleted," which signifies omissions of facts and numbers insisted upon by executive agencies.

But the first time the CIA permitted itself to be referred to by name in a published document of the Subcommittee during its three-year review of U.S. military commitments. Although specific CIA expenditures were stricken from the report, they could be simply computed by subtracting published figures listed for the Defense Department and AID from the overall totals given in the subcommittee report.

In a statement announcing release of the Laos report, Symington said he found it "an encouraging sign that the Executive Branch has finally agreed that much of what the United States government has been doing in Laos may now be made public."

The report, which has long kept this secret war in Laos officially hidden from

the American people has been partially lifted," he added. He protested, however, the administration's continued refusal to declassify much of the information bearing on U.S. support of Thai military forces in Laos.

Members of the Foreign Relations Committee have taken the position that the Thai units which have been acknowledged by the administration to be fighting in Laos are in violation of the Fulbright Amendment to the 1971 defense authorization and procurement bills. It prohibits American financing of third country forces in Cambodia and Laos and was designed to prevent further escalation of the U.S. role in the Indochinese war.

Most references to Thai troops in Laos were sanitized from the staff report. Foreign Relations Committee sources, however, indicated that the United States may have spent as much as \$35 million to finance a Thai "irregular" military presence in Laos.

The administration has refused to disclose how much it is spending for how many Thai troops in the Laotian war. Symington and other Foreign Relations Committee members, however, have cited publicly a figure of 4,800 Thai irregulars in Laos. This would indicate an approximate spending level of roughly \$7000 per Thai per year. A State Department spokesman said last week that there are fewer than 4,000 Thai "volunteers" in Laos.

"The Thai irregular program developed during the past year and was designed by the CIA specifically along the lines of the irregular program in Laos," the report said. "The CIA supervises and pays for the training of these irregulars in Thailand and provides their salary, allowances (including death benefits), and operational costs in Laos."

In objecting to the administration's secrecy policy on the Thai irregulars, Symington said, "The stated reason for this Executive Branch refusal to declassify this secret war is to avoid making public

what the governments of Thailand and Laos do not wish to make public. But since the taxpayers of this country are paying the bills, why should the recipient foreign governments have the right to dictate what our citizens can and cannot be told about the way in which public funds are being spent?"

Thai forces were introduced into Laos in significant numbers early last year when North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces swept across the Plain of Jars and nearly captured the strategic CIA command posts of Long Cheng and Sam Thong.

"At the time of our visit to Long Cheng on April 23," said the Lowenstein-Moose report, "there were (deleted) Thai there, at the nearby base of Sam Thong, and at Hill 1663 near Sam Thong. (There was also a small Thai team of (deleted) men at Nam Yu in Military Region I.)"

"We were told that the details of the funding were not known in Vientiane, as all of this bookkeeping is done in Washington," the staff report said. The administration contends that the Thai forces are volunteers, recruited in their homelands.

The staff report takes a grim view of the military prospects ahead for the Royal Laotian government of Premier Souvanna Phouma. It notes that since the Laotian "incursions" by South Vietnamese forces last spring, "more Lao territory has come under enemy control, and there are about three regiments more of North Vietnamese forces in southern Laos than there were before the Lam Son operation."

Despite the reported claims of destruction of North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao supply trucks — 12,368 damaged and destroyed in 1970 — the report says "these figures are not taken seriously by most U.S. officials, even Air Force officers . . ."

The report also listed—for the first time with tacit official agreement—the number of U.S. Air Force sor-

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C.I.A. Says It Maintains Force of 30,000 in Laos

By JOHN W. FINNEY
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Aug. 2—The Nixon Administration acknowledged today, through a Senate subcommittee staff report, that the Central Intelligence Agency was maintaining a 30,000-man "irregular" force now fighting throughout most of Laos.

Many news articles in recent years have described C.I.A. sponsorship of an irregular army in Laos. However, the subcommittee report represented the first time that the agency publicly and officially confirmed its military activities in Laos. The report indicated that the use of the irregular units in Laos was more widespread than had been indicated in the news accounts.

The force has become "the main cutting edge" of the Royal Laotian Army, according to the report, and has been supplemented by Thai "volunteers" recruited and paid by the C.I.A.

The agency's involvement in a secret war in Laos was finally confirmed officially in a staff report prepared for the Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee on foreign commitments by James G. Lowenstein and Richard M. Moose, two former Foreign Service officers who made an inspection trip to Laos in April. A version of their report, once classified top secret, was made public today after clearance by the C.I.A. as well as the State and Defense Departments.

Publication of the detailed 23-page report marks the formal acknowledgement of the secret war that the United States has been conducting in Laos ever since the breakdown of the 1962 Geneva accords, which were supposed to re-establish the neutrality of that country.

In making public the report, Senator Stuart Symington of Missouri, the subcommittee chairman, said: "It is an encouraging sign that the executive branch has finally agreed that much of the United States Government has been doing in Laos may now be made public. The veil of secrecy which has

long kept this secret war in Laos officially hidden from the American people has been partially lifted."

Senator Symington complained, however, that the executive branch was still refusing to make public "certain truths concerning the nature, composition and command arrangements of the Thai forces in Laos." The information the Administration has refused to make public, he said, bears on the question whether the recruitment of the Thai forces violates a provision against hiring soldiers that was written into the Defense Appropriations Act last year.

One fact kept secret by the executive branch is the presence in Laos—referred to in the past by Senator J. W. Fulbright—of a series of Thai generals who use the Thai equivalent of John Doe as their names. The senator did not give the Thai equivalent. In contending that the provision against hiring troops is not being violated, the State Department has argued that the Thai volunteers came under the command of the Royal Laotian Army.

Out of the report came the first detailed description of the rapidly rising cost of the American military involvement in a war in which, the report observed, "the Royal Lao Government continues to be almost totally dependent on the United States, perhaps more dependent on us than any other government in the world."

U.S. Spent \$284.2-Million

In the fiscal year 1970, which ended on July 1, a "partial total" of United States expenditures in Laos came to \$284.2-million, of which \$162.2-million was for military aid, \$52-million for economic aid and \$70-million was spent by the C.I.A. exclusive of the amount spent on the Thai forces.

This was the first time that the C.I.A. has permitted disclosure of its spending in Laos, and even then the figure came out indirectly through subtraction from over-all estimates included in the report.

In the current fiscal year, the report said, the estimated cost of military assistance has "risen rapidly," doubling since January, mostly because of increased ammunition being furnished the Royal Laotian and irregular forces. The cost of military and

economic aid plus the C.I.A. programs is now expected to come to \$374-million in the current fiscal year. At that level, the report observed, the cost will be more than three times as large as it was in fiscal 1967 and 25 times as large as when United States assistance began nine years ago.

Not included in these estimates were the costs of United States bombing operations in northern Laos in support of the Royal Laotian forces and in southern Laos against the Ho Chi Minh supply line used by North Vietnam.

The report said that American air operations in Laos had declined over the last two years, with United States planes aver-

aging 340 sorties a day this April, compared with a daily rate of 430 in the first part of 1969. At the same time, B-25 bombing in northern Laos has increased since it was begun in February, 1970, with what amounts to "free fire zones" being established for the bombers. These zones have been cleared of the civilian population and any activity in them can be considered to be supporting the enemy.

The report also said that in recent months the Chinese Communists have increased their air defenses along the road they are building in northern Laos, making the "area one of the most heavily defended in the world." The Chinese, the report said, have moved in "a heavy new increment" of radar-directed antiaircraft guns, raising the total to 395, including for the first time 85-mm. and 100-mm. guns that are effective up to 68,000 feet.

The area around the Chinese-built road is "off limits" to American planes, but the report noted that on at least two occasions the road had been attacked by unmarked Royal Laos air force T-28's furnished by the United States.

The Chinese build-up of anti-aircraft defenses began after an attack by two Laotian planes in January, 1970.

In the last two years, the report said, the size of the Chinese forces along the road has increased from 6,000 to between 14,000 and 20,000. Since November, 1970, the Chinese, in addition to "upgrading earlier road construction," have constructed eight small-arms firing ranges of a kind normally associated with garrisons of ground troops as well as a large basketball courts.

The Chinese road stretches from the Chinese border to Muang Sai in north-central Laos, with branches extending toward Dienbienphu in North Vietnam and toward the Thai border. The purpose of the road remains unclear, but the report observes that in terms of "areas of influence," the "practical effect of the Chinese road is that the Chinese border has already been shifted southward of encompass a substantial portion of northern Laos."

To subcommittee members, probably the most significant disclosure of the report was confirmation that their irregular units in Laos are "trained, equipped, supported, advised and to a great extent organized by the C.I.A."

The "B.G. units," as they are known. (For the French term "battalions guerrilliers"), "have become the cutting edge of the military," the report said, "leaving the Royal Lao Army as a force primarily devoted to a static defense."

These units began as a force of Meo tribesmen under Gen. Vang Pao operating around the Plain des Jarres, but now, the report said, they are operating in all sections of Laos except a small military region around Vientiane, the administrative capital.

Except for a 1,500-man cadre from the Royal Lao Army, all members of these units, according to the report, are "volunteers," with their rations and pay supplied indirectly by the C.I.A. and guaranteed evacuation of wounded by air America helicopters.

At one point in 1968-69, the size of the irregular forces totaled 38,000 men, according to the report, but it is now down to about 30,000 men, largely because of desertions, heavy casualties and "financial restraints incurred by budgetary limitations."

With the military manpower base in Laos "exhausted," the report said, the agency turned to Thai "volunteers" to supplement the irregular forces.

The precise number of Thai "volunteers" in Laos was deleted from the report, but Senator Clifford P. Case of New Jersey and Senator Fulbright have used a figure of about 4,800.

The report—made public, in its declassified form, with gaps representing security delisions—said:

"Most of the irregulars have been recruited, we were told, outside the Thai army, although (deleted)."